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The Natural Side of Henry Horton State Park

By Randy Whitworth



Photo by LinnAnn Welch

Brochures tout Henry Horton State Park in Chapel Hill as a "golfers paradise," but there is another side of this 1,100-acre park to see, and that's the natural side.

The first things you will need are hiking shoes and a trail map from the park office. Start out at Wilhoite Mill Trail, a three-quarter mile loop along the Duck River and Spring Creek, a wet weather tributary. Wilhoite Mill and Village were developed in the mid-1800s and were home to a three-story inn, post office, and of course, a mill and dam. In spite of flood and fire the mill operation continued for more than a century. Then, seemingly beyond repair, the wooden structures were razed in the early 1980s leaving only the metal gear works and wheels which remain today.

In addition to the historical significance of the Wilhoite Mill Trail, its Spring Creek is one of only five tributary streams of the Duck River where the endangered Tennessee Clubtail Dragonfly, *Gomphus sandrius*, is found. In fact it is found nowhere else in the world. Spring Creek is dry much of the year with some ponds and gravel bar islands of Water Willow Weed, which seem to be preferred by the clubtail nymph.

The Hickory Ridge Nature Loop exemplifies karst topography found throughout the Central Basin. Cool and moist limestone fissures are home to ferns such as Ebony Spleenwort, Maidenhair, and Cliffbrake. Mature Shagbark Hickories thrive on a rocky "ridge," the trail's high point.

Along this trail, take note of the various-sized sinkholes, their shapes determined over long periods of acidic water seepage into limestone joints. The ephemeral stream and pond are dry during most of the year, their water quickly escaping through porous limestone bedrock and joints. Huge limestone outcroppings make attractive perimeters to adjacent primitive area campsites.

The Wild Turkey Trail is a two-and-one-half mile hike through a mature oak-hickory forest and along two former farm fields well into natural succession. Oak-hickory is the most prevalent type of forest in Tennessee, comprising nearly three-fourths of all forested land. Although oaks and hickories are sporadic seed producers, it is not evident on the forest floor, a virtual nursery of the next generations of trees. Hikers see an occasional White-tailed Deer and Wild Turkey, and these and other mammal tracks are prevalent around an old farm pond.

Sadly, invasive exotic plants are a common sight at Henry Horton and efforts have begun to eradicate Bush Honeysuckle, Tree-of-Heaven, and Privet.

A fourth trail is under construction on the park's east boundary. This trail will be handicapped accessible and native plants of the Central Basin will be identified there. A grant from Tennessee Parks and Greenways Foundation made the project's beginning possible. The Iris Fund paid for purchase of trees and the recent award of a Recreation Trail Program grant allows for the completion of the trail with a porous concrete surface. Signage is planned along the trail and the trail head kiosk was constructed by an Eagle Scout candidate.

Speaking of native plants, check out the five-acre Indian Grass field near the inn. Before the introduction of cool season grasses, Tennessee fields were covered with warm season grasses like Big Bluestem, Little Bluestem, and Indian Grass (TCM, September/October 1999).

Conversion of a separate 10-acre field to prairie (native grasses and wildflowers) is now underway. Rangers point to benefits like fewer acres requiring weekly mowing; less pollution by lawn equipment; fewer man hours of labor; and, most importantly, beautification and food/habitat for songbirds, butterflies, and small mammals.

Rangers have permission through the state and federal government to operate a raptor rehabilitation station. Weak or injured birds of prey are brought to the station for temporary feeding and/or recovery from injury. A Lewisburg veterinarian, Dr. Ray Wakefield, offers his professional services at no charge and about 50 percent of the birds brought to the station can be returned to the wild.

For the All Taxa Biodiversity Inventory, two plots of about 2.5 acres each of natural area have been set aside within the park. Area high school and university biology classes are assisting with identification of every living thing within the plots. This ongoing work could discover new species like similar projects in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park (TCM, July/August 2003). Data gathered will bolster environmental education and preservation efforts by rangers.

Sections of the park have been set aside for tree saplings obtained in past years through the National Tree Trust. As these 2,000-plus trees mature, they are planted at Henry Horton State Park and in state parks throughout Tennessee. Iris Fund monies have been used to contract the extraction (a ball and burlap/wire basket process) of the trees. Then, interested rangers at other state parks pick them up for their home park's use.

The Iris Fund is available for native plantings on state parks through individual purchases of the iris license plate. Iris Fund monies have also been used for the removal of approximately eight acres of exotic invasive plants at Henry Horton.

One of the real jewels of Middle Tennessee is the Duck River. The Duck runs for almost 270 miles through seven counties and Henry Horton State Park. It has been called a natural treasure with a host of species dependent upon it for daily food, water, and shelter. Notable residents of the Duck River include the endangered Birdwing Pearly Mussel (*Conradilla caelata*) and the Slabside Pearly Mussel (*Lexingtonia dolabelloides*). This great freshwater stream provides favorable conditions to many rare species of plants and animals included in the Natural Heritage database including Glade Cress; the Duck River Bladderpod; the Golden, Redband, and Coppercheek Darters; the Saddled Madtom; the Rayed Bean Snuffbox, and others.

In addition, consider the many recreational opportunities provided to our citizens by the Duck River as it meanders toward its destination, the Tennessee River, an "as the crow flies" distance of barely 100 miles.

A weekly schedule of Henry Horton State Park's programs offers a chance to learn about these and other natural "happenings" at Henry Horton State Park. Copies of the current week's programs are available at the park office, or a copy of the programs can be e-mailed to you each week if you leave your e-mail address with the park. For more information about the park, call 931-364-7724.

(Ranger Randy Whitworth, a naturalist at heart, focuses on natural resource management and environmental education, as well as other ranger duties. He has been caring for Henry Horton

State Park for 28 years.)

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